Resources for Teamwork

Ayush Gupta

Readings

1. TEAM-WORK Readings (Harvard Business Review): Designing an effective Meeting Agenda
2. See this short video from Google: Project Aristotle
3. TEAM-WORK Readings (Harvard Business Review): Smarter Teamwork
4. Five Key things that Google found for successful teamwork
5. Fostering Psychological Safety

In the scenario-discussions below, I want to highlight some of the ways in which we can engender psychological safety within our teams. Doing this is hard. But teams can do great if they take this on as an important issue.

Teamwork Scenario #1

1. How to Dis**egg**ree?

John and Mandy are in a sub-team of an engineering design team. They are tasked with determining if the water in a tub is fresh water or salt water. They need this in order fulfil other tasks that the design team is assigned. Here is a brief dialogue between John and Mandy:

John says: (*Excited voice)* You know, eggs float in salt-water but not in fresh water. We could use that to test whether the water in the pool in the arena is fresh or salty.

Mandy (thinking to self: *EGG?, really? Like, really? Where do I even start with that?*).

If you were Mandy, what would you say out loud? (Try to come up with many different options, and reflect on how they would impact the team's psychological safety.)

Teamwork Scenario #2

Choosing a meeting time scenario: Your team did a when2meet poll, and turns out 7 people like to meet Thursday evenings. Maya has not shown up for the last two meetings, and has indicated that she is not available on Thursdays. What do you do?

(Try to come up with many different options, and reflect on how they would team dynamics.)

Variation: Now take on Maya's perspective. How do you think Maya sees this situation?

Some Language Resources for Teamwork

Think about ways in which to challenge ideas, in a way that opens up dialog rather than shut it down:

1. "Could you say more about that idea"
    - sometimes a person, in clarifying their idea will help you understand it better. What if your diagnoses of the flaw was really because you did not understand what that person was trying to say?
2. "Maybe before we critique ideas, let's do a braindump - so everyone has a chance to share what they were thinking"
    - this can help get a list of ideas before shutting anything down
    - Some people are eager to suggest something right away for anything that comes up. Other people like to think individually a bit before they are ready to share -- how can we open up space for collecting individual thought, so that the first speaker does not hijack the conversation
3. "That sounds like a cool idea. Can we think a bit more about the pros and cons of the idea"
    - sometimes a person already knows about flaws in their idea. This could give them a chance to express how they see the strengths and weaknesses of their idea - maybe they will themselves point out the flaw that you would have … but now the person might be more open to brainstorming or refining the idea, since they were themselves able to articulate the flaws (minor or major) instead of someone else pointing it out.

4. Think carefully: sometimes flaws in ideas are very fixable! And so you don't want to discard an idea that needs just a tiny refinement, not replacement.
5. "I wanted to make sure I really understand your idea. Is it ok if I repeat your idea back, and you can let me know if I am capturing it fully"
6. "Hmm, I think I am tuning into some places where this idea might run into problems, but before that - let me check if I really understand your idea"
7. "I really like XYZ aspects of your idea, but I can also see some places where it will run into some problems ABC. In any case, all ideas will require refinement, How should we think about balancing the pros and cons? Should we make a decision matrix?"
8. (If the team hasn't had a chance to brainstorm before this:) "Before we brainstorm ideas, can we make a list of our goals for this component, and criterion along which we will judge what are the good ideas"
    - Doing this can really help in decision making

Some more prompts that you can use in team meetings:

9. "Some of us haven't shared yet. And so I just wanted to create some space for all of us to be able to get a chance to share"
    - But also: Not everyone wants to participate by speaking - could we open up ways for folks to participate without speaking
10. "How about we each take a few minutes to draw/sketch or list our own individual ideas before we share out"
    - Also keep track of ideas that are generated, and the decision making rationales -- so that another sub-team could understand why/how you made a decision
11. "We have our top 3 ideas for the mission solving - maybe let's take a few minutes to think about every which way these ideas can fail. That way we can refine the ideas against failure. Maybe a combination of the 3 ideas would be best. Let's take some individual time to think about failure possibilities, before we share out"
12. Imagine someone is again! late to the team meeting. Saying, "Damn it, this person is not doing their job!" can feel good at times, but is not always productive. What if, instead of that, we said,
    - "Hey, X is late again. Do we know if we accidentally keep scheduling the meeting at a time that is challenging for them?"
    - "Hey, X is late. Can someone text them to find out if we should wait to start the meeting"
    - "Hey, X is late and hasn't sent me the motor specs they were due to send. I wonder if they are OK. We should try to make sure that if they need any support from the team, we know about that."

Think with empathy. We do not know what is going on in Maya's life. In our own class we have a lot of diversity of backgrounds and life experiences. People are taking different amounts of total credits for the semester; some are working in addition to taking courses, others aren't; some are commuter students while others live on campus; some might find college life easy, others struggle; some might be going through a circumstance where they can't fully attend to the coursework. Or maybe, there's been some situation in the team, where Maya might be feeling uncomfortable attending the team meeting.

Leading with empathy does not mean giving a blank check to people for not contributing to teamwork. But it does mean that we look deeper at those who are finding it difficult to participate, and doing so while withholding judgement. And being open to first spending some time and energy in offering help, if needed.